

The Four Steps of Food Safety

According to the USDA, one in every six Americans will get food poisoning this year. Don't be one of them! Simply follow the four steps we've outlined below in order to make your home a safe place to eat.

Step One: Wash

- Bacteria can be hardy, and the last thing you want to do is start with items that are covered in germs. Your hands, tools, and foods should all be clean before you cook.
- Start by washing your hands. Use soap and running water, and make sure to scrub for at least 20 seconds. Don't feel like counting? Just sing "Happy Birthday" to yourself twice -- that's about how long it takes to wash your hands well. Don't worry, it doesn't actually have to be your birthday.
- Once your hands are clean, scrub your tools. Follow the USDA's advice and "Wash cutting boards, dishes, utensils, and counter tops with hot, soapy water after preparing each food item and before you go on to the next item." Make sure everything is clean before you begin preparing a meal too.
- Now that your hands, counters, and implements are clean, it's time to wash your food. Scrub any fruits or vegetables thoroughly -- even if your next step is peeling them!

Step Two: Separate

- Cross-contamination is a huge part of many food poisoning cases. Steer clear of it by keeping raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs separate from all other foods.
- Begin in the grocery store or market. When you shop, keep these items away from the rest of your purchases, then bag them separately.
- When you arrive home, put these items in their own sealed containers and into the refrigerator right away. This will reduce the risk of them "leaking" onto other foods and contaminating them. If you don't plan on using meat, poultry, or seafood right away, place it directly into the freezer.
- Keep eggs in the main part of the refrigerator, not the door.

- When it is time to prepare your meal, keep the raw eggs, seafood, meat, and poultry away from the ready-to-eat foods. Use one cutting board for the raw foods that can cause contamination, and another for everything else. Use one set of utensils and plates for raw foods and another for cooked items. After you're done with all of these tools, wash them thoroughly.

Step Three: Cook

- According to the USDA, "the bacteria that cause food poisoning multiply quickest in the 'Danger Zone' between 40° and 140° Fahrenheit." It's important to cook your food thoroughly and keep it at the right temperature.
- Use a food thermometer to make sure that your meal has reached the right temperature. To check, place the thermometer in the thickest part of the food, and compare your reading to the USDA's cooking temperature guide, which is available at <http://www.foodsafety.gov/keep/charts/mintemp.html>. Wash your thermometer thoroughly after each use.
- Keep food at or above 140° Fahrenheit.
- If you're using the microwave, make sure the food reaches 165° Fahrenheit. Stir it at least once, halfway through cooking.

Step Four: Chill

- Steer clear of countertops! Defrost or marinate foods in the refrigerator or cold water. This will discourage bacterial growth.
- Once you're done with your meal, get your leftovers into the fridge right away. Food should be chilled within two hours, and only one if it's summertime.
- When in doubt, throw it out! You can't always tell by sight or smell whether harmful bacteria have begun to grow on your leftovers, so use the USDA's safe storage times chart instead. Access it at <http://www.foodsafety.gov/keep/charts/storagetimes.html>.

For more information, visit http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Food_Safety_Education/Check_Your_Steps/index.asp